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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MANILA 000495

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SUBJECT: PHILIPPINES: ASEAN SUMMIT A QUALIFIED SUCCESS

REF: MANILA 386

Classified By: Ambassador Kristie A. Kenney, Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

11. (C) SUMMARY: Notwithstanding widely-published reports of ASEAN members' disappointment at the absence of major Northeast Asia powers China, Japan, and South Korea from the recently-concluded 14th ASEAN Summit in Thailand, together with ASEAN's reported failure to confront the region's human rights problems, the Philippine Department of Foreign Affairs' Executive Director for ASEAN Affairs Maria Teresa Taguiang characterized the Summit as a qualified success in several areas. She said that the creation of ASEAN's first-ever human rights body is moving ahead on schedule, and the organization's member states are deepening economic cooperation in the face of global recession and taking other steps to ensure greater regional integration. Taguiang echoed sentiments expressed earlier by Philippine Foreign Secretary Romulo to the Ambassador, in which he welcomed possible U.S. accession to ASEAN's Treaty of Amity and Cooperation. END SUMMARY.

12. (C) In a March 4 conversation with Embassy officials, Acting ASEAN Affairs Executive Director Maria Teresa Taguiang of the Philippine Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA) downplayed widely-published reports that, in barring two human rights activists to whom Burma and Cambodia objected, ASEAN had backed away from dealing with regional human rights issues. Taguiang outlined that the event from which the activists had been excluded was merely one of the meetings with civil-society groups, youth, and business interests held on the margins of the Summit to highlight its theme of a "people-centered ASEAN." She went on to note that a high-level ASEAN panel had delivered its first draft of terms of reference for the human rights body that resulted from ASEAN's new charter (which entered into force in December). Taguiang outlined that ASEAN hopes to have a final terms-of-reference draft for the human rights body ready in time for the ASEAN Foreign Ministers meeting in July, followed by its formal launch at the 15th ASEAN Summit, to be held in Vietnam. Taguiang shared the enthusiasm expressed February 23 by Philippine Foreign Secretary Alberto Romulo at possible U.S. accession to ASEAN's Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC), as alluded to recently by the Secretary during her visit to Jakarta (reftel).

CONSENSUS WILL CONTINUE TO CHARACTERIZE ASEAN

13. (C) The Executive Director said that, with regard to Burma, the nation widely considered ASEAN's most recalcitrant member on human rights, there were nonetheless measureable signs of progress in Burma's greater engagement with the outside world. She offered as an example Burma's willingness to extend indefinitely the mandate of the tripartite core group coordinating post-Typhoon-Nargis recovery efforts, which had been previously scheduled to expire in July. Taguiang observed that, although the EU and other regional organizations all offered useful features to emulate, there

was no desire on the part of ASEAN members to model the organization on the EU, and that consensus-based decision-making and noninterference in each other's internal affairs would continue to be the hallmarks of ASEAN's approach. She opined that the military junta ruling Burma had responded better to engagement than to pressure.

ASEAN OPPOSED TO PROTECTIONISM

14. (C) Turning to the effects of the global economic downturn, Taguiang underscored closing remarks by Thailand's Prime Minister in which he highlighted the region's economic resiliency, while conceding that a sense of urgency existed in the need to restore confidence. She emphasized that ASEAN remains opposed to protectionism in any form, and committed to the creation of a region-wide free trade area by 2015. As examples of the region's ever-increasing economic integration, the Executive Director pointed to ASEAN's new trade pact with Australia and New Zealand, as well as the newly-created \$120 billion ASEAN equity fund, which member states will be able to tap into in order to address liquidity problems brought on by the worldwide economic crisis.

COMMENT

15. (C) Philippine national media have highlighted the recent ASAEAN Summit primarily in rather negative terms: disillusionment at some members' stubbornness toward dialogue on human rights, discouragement at any early prospect for a return to robust economic growth in Southeast Asia, plus

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disappointment at the absence of Northeast Asia's economic powers. The leading daily Philippine Star on February 26 had reported the Cambodian Prime Minister's comment that the Summit was a "waste of time" without China, Japan, and South Korea in attendance, and even Philippine diplomats publicly conceded that their interest had "really waned" in the absence of the three Northeast Asian powers. The Executive Director's comments to Embassy officers clearly appear intended to offset such sentiments, and instead underscore ASEAN's slow but steady progress on human rights and resolve to work together to overcome the debilitating effects of recent global economic trends.

KENNEY